Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback^{SM}

By Bryan Lindert

Bringing Business Intelligence to Child Welfare

There is no call a child welfare professional dreads more than the one advising them that a child has passed away on his or her agency's watch. The call is even more chilling when that death might have been prevented.

This is true not only because of the failures that may have contributed to the tragedy, but also because of the system consequences and predictable media narrative they can reinforce. Ask the public what they think about the child welfare system and it will often be described as "broken" as a result of a recent local fatality. All one has to do is scan the daily news articles in the "Child Welfare in the News" from the Child Welfare Information Gateway Library to confirm that statement.

These stories have far-reaching consequences. In fact, according to research by Auburn and Grady commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America, they often "weaken the Village," and "reduce overall trust that communities are able to set up collective solutions to problems." Thus, child welfare systems are potentially undermined and grass-roots community participation is diminished at precisely the moment when it is needed most. (See *http://www.frameworksinstitute .org/toolkits/canp/resources/pdf/ HowTheNewsFramesChildAbuse.pdf*.)

The Beginning of Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠

In Tampa, FL, Mike Carroll, regional director and now interim secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families, wanted to change the broken record. In reviewing the fatalities that occurred over a two-year period, Carroll noticed that quality review after quality review, and panel after panel, reached similar conclusions regarding what was missed when reviewing these deaths after

they occurred. In fact, after a series of nine child homicides he said, "I could almost write the reviews before reading the next case."

Following these tragedies in July 2012, Eckerd assumed control of the local system of care. At that time, Carroll asked the organization to radically redefine its approach to continuous quality improvement. The goal was to identify cases that were most likely to end in tragedy and to intervene in advance to improve the case practice, changing the case trajectory to a more positive outcome. The hope was that this would lead to a proactive approach to prevent child fatalities from occurring, rather than the traditional reactive approach of studying a case post-tragedy.

Eckerd first completed a multidisciplinary Quality and Safety Improvement review of all open cases—more than 1,500 in Hillsborough County. This review would help ensure that children were safe, while also providing Eckerd with critical information on system gaps and the roadblocks that led to these deaths and were also adversely affecting whether or not a child was reunified with their family in a timely manner.

After gathering information from this process and then reaching out to national experts for additional input, two distinct sets of criteria emerged. The first was the profile of those cases with the highest probability of serious injury or death occurring. These cases had multiple common factors, including children under the age of three; a paramour in the home; parental substance abuse and domestic violence history; and parent(s) previously in the foster care system.

This research and analysis also identified nine critical child welfare practice skills that were necessary to ensuring that children in the targeted cases remained safe. These included quality safety planning; quality supervisory reviews, gathering input from external sources, validating behavior change, and the quality and frequency of home visits, background checks, case planning, and follow-up.

Last, the Florida State Child Welfare Data System (SACWIS) had limitations in its ability to provide real-time data. As a result, Eckerd worked with a technology partner, Mindshare, to provide system overlay software allowing data and dashboards that would support real-time identification of cases meeting the profile for review and enhanced tracking for needed case actions.

Having identified the highest risk cases and the critical child welfare practices necessary to keep children safe, Eckerd launched its Rapid Safety Feedback process in January 2013. As part of this process, each of the high-probability cases is reviewed by Eckerd quality assurance staff utilizing the

Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ tool, which focuses on nine critical case practices. These cases are reviewed quarterly until case closure or until the youngest child turns three. Within one business day after review, Eckerd quality assurance staff meets with the case manager and supervisor to develop a plan to ensure any safety concerns are quickly mitigated, and to provide immediate coaching and support for case management staff. Agreed-upon tasks are then tracked to completion by Eckerd quality staff using an automated process that ensures accountability.

Is Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ Working?

While there is no magic bullet or crystal ball that will prevent all fatalities, initial results from the process are encouraging. Since Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ was implemented, Eckerd has seen a 22 percent improvement in the nine case practices that are critical to changing case outcomes along with a 21 percent reduction in all in home abuse. Most important, there have been no abuse fatalities since the process' inception.

The focused use of Eckerd quality assurance resources as a supplement to those handling the cases on a daily basis is designed to address some of the key challenges in child welfare. This is because one of the key decision-making flaws cited in retrospective reviews of child welfare fatalities is that reviewers tend to have a previously formed opinion, or bias, of the family or case trajectory. As noted in Eileen Munro's Common Errors in Reasoning in Child Protection published in Child Abuse and Neglect, in 1999:

"The most striking and persistent criticism was that professionals were slow to revise their judgments," and "become absorbed into present day issues and failed to stand back and place current events into a longer term assessment of the family. This bias can be very powerful in preserving the current risk assessment by obscuring the pattern of behavior or the frequency with which small worrying incidents are happening."

By utilizing its quality assurance staff as part of an oversight function, Eckerd brings impartial review by a comparatively experienced professional with no prior connection to the case. Consultation occurs only after an independent file review and the completion of the structured nine-question tool. In fact, the premise of case consultation is a disagreement between the quality assurance reviewer and the case manager. This diminishes any natural tendencies toward consensus that might also occur as part of traditional case conferences.

Another challenge in child welfare is the retrospective review of small, but statistically significant samples that many states use to monitor case practice. The Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ process focuses resources on the highest risk samples, which allows practices to be addressed and changed in real time.

These changes represent a paradigm shift in the understanding of the role of continuous quality improvement in child welfare. It is not enough to re-report known practice issues quarter after quarter; issuing detailed reports of case imperfections that are disregarded by line staff. Instead, intervention and joint accountability are best achieved through multiplying the number of coaching opportunities, engaging in dialogue about findings instead of issuing didactic reports; and reviewing the case when critical decisions can still benefit from external input.

Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ Expands

Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ has been replicated in the other counties where Eckerd is the community-based care lead agency. In addition, the Florida Department of Children and Families began to implement Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ statewide in January 2014, in response to a statewide pattern of child tragedies outside the Tampa Bay area.

In June 2014, the Federal Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities asked Eckerd to present on the process and its initial results. Eckerd has also presented the approach at national meetings at the request of Casey Family Programs, the Alliance for Children and Families, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Child Welfare League of America.

The focused review of cases with a high potential for a poor outcomes is not limited to fatal maltreatment. Eckerd is also exploring how the Eckerd Rapid Safety Feedback℠ process could have a positive impact on children at risk for re-entering the foster care system once a permanent placement is found. This exciting potential is being developed internally and Eckerd hopes to roll out a broader process in late 2014.

Eckerd's Role in Child Welfare

Eckerd is a national nonprofit organization that has given much-needed second chances to more than 150,000 children and families since 1968. Founded by philanthropists Jack and Ruth Eckerd, who believed every child deserved the opportunity to succeed, Eckerd serves more than 15,000 children and their families each year through life-changing child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health programs and services in seven states. To learn more, visit *www.Eckerd.org*.

In Florida, the child welfare system utilizes a unique system of community-based care where the Florida Department of Children and Families contracts with 20 community-based care lead agencies that manage the child welfare system in each of the corresponding 20 judicial circuits. Eckerd is the community-based care lead agency in three Florida counties—Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas.

Eckerd manages a system of continuous quality assurance for all of its 35 operating programs through its headquarters in Clearwater. This allows for an unbiased approach to quality of care. ◼

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